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U.S. Senate adopts King, Thompson approach to FEMA *Lott, Collins agree agency should remain within DHS*

Washington, D.C. (Thursday, June 29, 2006)—Today, U.S. Rep. Peter T. King (R-NY), Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, and Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) praised U.S. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Trent Lott (R-MS) for reaching an agreement on Senate legislation that would strengthen the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The Senate bill mirrors the position adopted by the House Committee on Homeland Security.

“The Senate agrees—FEMA must stay within DHS,” King said. “I am glad to see that Senator Collins and Senator Lott have reached the same conclusion as our Committee. Strengthening FEMA within the Department—making it independent, while still allowing it ready-access to DHS resources—is clearly the most effective way to enhance our disaster response capabilities. This should end the debate over whether FEMA should remain within DHS.”

“I applaud today's announcement by the Senate to strengthen FEMA while keeping it within the Department of Homeland Security. This just furthers the call to keep FEMA in the Department that has been made by myself, Chairman King and every major fire and law enforcement organization,” Thompson said. “It is clear that the only way to truly improve our nation's emergency preparedness and response is to enact legislation that is built upon lessons learned from our failed response to Hurricane Katrina.”

Earlier today, Senators Collins and Lott announced, after months of consideration, that they had reached a compromise on legislation to overhaul FEMA. Their bill makes FEMA an autonomous agency within DHS similar to the U.S. Coast Guard, prohibiting the DHS Secretary from making changes to the agency's structure or budget without Congressional approval. The bill also grants the Director of FEMA additional powers, including access to the President on emergency matters and the authority to make recommendations directly to Congress.

Members of the House are currently debating whether to strengthen FEMA within DHS or strip it out, creating an independent agency. The House Committee on Homeland Security's approach, strengthening FEMA within DHS based on the Coast Guard model, has received widespread support from the first responder community. The International Association of Fire Fighters, International Association of Fire Chiefs, Fraternal Order of Police, National Troopers Coalition, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Congressional Fire Services Institute, National Fire Protection Association, National Volunteer Fire Council, and International Association of Arson Investigators have all come out in favor of keeping FEMA within the Department.

"Our first responders understand that, in the realities of a post-9/11 world, FEMA must remain within the Department as part of our all-hazards approach to emergency response," King said. "Stripping FEMA out of DHS would be duplicative, bureaucratic, and wasteful, and do severe harm to our ability to respond to natural disasters and terrorist attacks. This is about saving lives—and our approach, agreed on by the Senate and endorsed by first responders nationwide, is the only logical choice."

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